



Giving tenants the Royal treatment

01:00 AM EDT on Thursday, July 6, 2006

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WEST WARWICK -- It was the engine behind the Fruit of the Loom brand. The workplace for 1,200 laborers. A symbol of the town's economic vitality, and later of its painful decline.

Now, more than two years into an \$80-million redevelopment project, the Royal Mills is being transformed into something bolder still: a home.

On June 2, Baltimore-based Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse opened a leasing office in an air-conditioned trailer at its construction site on Providence Street. On the first weekend, 135 people visited. Five submitted a security deposit, although prospective tenants can tour only one model apartment and the trip requires a hard hat.

"It's not the decrepit old mill anymore," said Quentin Chafee, the project's development director.

Struever Bros. has celebrated many milestones in the past two years. It bought the 14-acre property from the town for one dollar on June 15, 2004. Last March, the mill's 86-year-old bronze bell began tolling for the first time in a generation. Recently, the company hosted a barbecue to mark the lighting of the electric sign atop the complex.

But the signing of leases is perhaps the most significant moment yet, the first real test of Struever Bros.'s giant gamble: building luxury apartments miles from downtown Providence and in one of the state's poorest communities.

Struever Bros. is competing for empty nesters and young professionals who could live in similarly historic, refurbished buildings such as the Promenade at the Foundry and the Peerless LOFTS. There, the high ceilings, hardwood floors and exposed pipes are in downtown Providence near elegant bistros, concert halls and the Providence Place Mall.

For comparable rent, the Royals Mills will put you within walking distance of a Department of Public Works yard, a dog pound and a soap factory.

"Let's face it, West Warwick is not an economically booming town," said Ida Zecco, 54. "You kind of wonder what made these people pick this place."

But in a feat of near alchemy, the company has transformed its sliver of the suburban Riverpoint village into a mini-metropolis as fashionable as Duncity but with better parking.

Main Street in nearby Arctic has no chic pub, health club or town green.

But fear not. Royal Mills itself will include a cafe with pool tables and plasma TVs; a private gym; and a furnished wood patio with a fire pit, propane grills and colossal steel planters made from the mill's boilers.

The town's Riverwalk remains incomplete. But the Royal Mills property has built outdoor paths of tumbled pavers and has repaired a bridge that crosses the Pawtuxet River near the dam and waterfall that once powered the textile plant.

Across Providence Street, the company plans to transform a 34,000-square-foot former cotton shed into an upscale restaurant and produce market.

"We'll have to generate our own energy," Chafee said. "We're not in the center of the hustle and bustle of the city. But you do something like this and it may spur other things."

So far, the strategy appears to be working. Nearly 125 workers daily rove the site, which is littered with construction debris. But radio ads and billboards on buses -- produced by the Providence-based Nail Advertising agency -- have raised the project's profile statewide, said Cynthia Rhilinger, the assistant property manager.

Staff in the leasing trailer are confident they will rent the 91 apartments being completed this summer, as well as 62 more that will be ready in October. "We're doing very well," Rhilinger said. "There's a huge interest."

The monthly rent, according to a company brochure, ranges from \$1,190 to \$2,795 depending on floor space and the number of bedrooms and bathrooms.

Already, Rhilinger said, Struever Bros. is fielding inquiries about 78 condominiums that will eventually go on sale, as tours of the buildings alter the perception of West Warwick.

Count Ida Zecco among the converted. She grew up in West Warwick and could not wait to escape the 8-square-mile town. She has traveled extensively and now lives in a three-story, seaside Victorian in Winthrop, Mass.

Last month, she signed a lease for a split-level two-bedroom, two-bath apartment at the Royal Mills, and she says she hopes to move in by September.

"I spent my whole adolescence trying to get out of that town. Now I'm going back to live on the other side on the street from the junior high I attended," she said yesterday. The Royal Mills, she said, "looks like what you'd find in a really beautiful metropolitan area, like Boston, like New York. Hip. Gorgeous."